



For a taste of Mexican culture (and a taste of home), try La Casa de Don Porfirio, home of Oaxaca's "killer bagels."

Photos by Bob Rosenberg

Calvin Trillin, that well-known food maven cum wiseguy, wrote recently in *The New Yorker* that any place outside the domain of "killer bagels" — those chewy, dense delicious specimens coveted by denizens of "the city" and others "in the know" (mostly people from the East Coast) — is known to his family as "the bagel barrens."

Philadelphia is certainly not in the "bagel barrens," with our plethora of superior bagel bakeries located in nearly every ward and precinct of the city. But Oaxaca? In Mexico?

Oaxaca is a colorful city of about half a million inhabitants, located in a high valley about 350 miles southwest of cosmopolitan Mexico City. It is known primarily for its clear, dry weather; archaeological treasures; and colorful ancient Indian cultures, Zapotec and Mixtec.

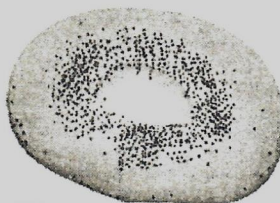
Oaxaca is also famous for its *mole* pastes, black, red and green — concoctions of chiles, seeds, nuts and other ingredients (sometimes including chocolate) that are used to season poultry and meat. But — until now — the city has never been known for its bagels. Mexico City, with its huge and varied populations, has a few bagel purveyors that provide their wares to delis catering to locals and bagel-hungry gringos.

Now, however, a charming small cafe has opened in downtown Oaxaca, not far from the famed Rufino Tamayo museum. Called La Casa de Don Porfirio, the little restaurant is building its reputation on bagels and spreads concocted from the requisite cream cheese, of course, with embellishments such as *salmon ahumado* (smoked salmon), sliced tomatoes, cucumbers and other less-traditional, but delicious, ingredients.

So how did bagels of any sort, let alone the "killer" variety, make their way to this most ethnic Mexican town? And who eats them?

As for the "how," you have to credit a charming young couple

'KILLER BAGELS' INVADE OAXACA



Correction

In last week's travel article, "Killer Bagels' Invade Oaxaca," the byline was inadvertently omitted. The author was Barbara Ann Rosenberg.



THE CHEWY,
DENSE MORSELS
GO SOUTH
OF THE BORDER

who lived for several years in Baja California, a beautiful area that is, however, pretty devoid of Mexican culture. Gabriella Meade and Alexandro Leyva longed for their "roots" and were certain they could find a place to live where they could bask in the best of their culture as well as make a living.

Culture and cream cheese

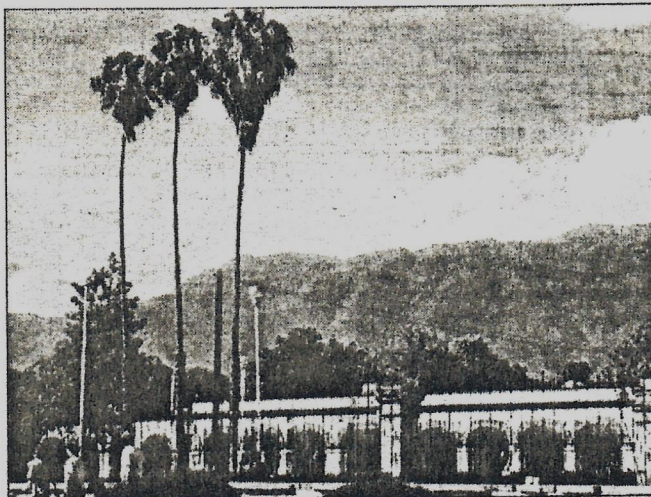
They discovered Oaxaca. Loaded with culture as it is, the city fulfilled their first requirement. Then they found a labyrinthine little *tienda* — a storefront on Calle Porfirio Diaz, just around the corner from the museum that houses painter Rufino Tamayo's stunning personal collection of pre-Hispanic artifacts. It's just a few blocks from the lively Zocalo, the colorful square that is the heart of the action in Oaxaca and in other traditional Mexican cities.

The next step, of course, was for the married couple — Gabriella has kept her own name — to stock the *tienda* with appealing products: books, CDs and tapes relating to Mexican culture. Then they provided tasty sustenance to draw patrons to their lovely little store that opens onto a tiny garden — a few tables, some chairs, a sprinkling of handicrafts to provide the proper atmosphere.

Still, they needed an appealing yet sophisticated "hook" for the kind of place they had in mind, where people could come and browse and stay to eat or "graze" and carry on conversation. Recalling other locations they had visited, they decided on something that people of all ethnic persuasions seemed to love — bagels. Unique to Oaxaca and appealing to everyone.

Meade and Leyva relied on "contacts" that found them a baker willing to experiment with making bagels, and to keep experimenting

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Sightseeing in the mile-high Oaxaca valley means lots of natural beauty.

Photo by Bob Rosenberg

'Killer Bagels' Invade Oaxaca

TRAVEL from page 15-X

until he found perfection (or as close to perfection as one can get deep in what, until now, was the "bagel barrens"). The finished product is properly chewy, properly dense, proper in every way, except that it lacks the shine of the "real thing."

Never mind. Given the circumstances of its birth, it is a genuine winner. Better, by far, than some of the nationally advertised little specimens that make their way into freezer cases of Philadelphia supermarkets.

But no matter how dedicated a bagel lover one is, bagels alone do not a tourist destination make. So what else is there to do in Oaxaca?

A stroller's delight

Well, it seems that some time ago, an enthusiastic observer quipped that with all its history and archaeology, it would be a splendid idea just to put a roof over all of Oaxaca and designate the entire area a museum. The colonial buildings are beautiful and scattered liberally throughout the city. Walking the downtown area and gawking at the pastel buildings is a joy.

For shoppers, there are jewelry shops aplenty, purveyors of silver and gold or gold-washed replicas of pieces found in Tomb 7 of the magnificent archaeological site of Monte Albán, a short, fascinating side trip from the city.

Another archaeological site that is a "must" is the much smaller, sophisticated Mitla, about 20 miles south, reached over good roads, with a stop at the 2,000-year-old gigantic Tula tree en route. Then perhaps a stop at Teotitlán del Valle, where nearly every house is a store for the rug weavers living there.

In fact, there are craft villages throughout the Oaxaca valley, where you can watch woodworkers, potters, specialists in clay of various colors and textures, and weavers working on primitive backstrap looms.

There are shops in town specializing in each of the above, and generalists carrying all of them.

The Benito Juárez Market is a fascinating place to start. Apart from the variety of stalls inside the permanent brick building, there are



What's a toasted bagel without cream cheese, cucumber and a nice slice of tomato?

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handicraft stalls on the side streets surrounding the market, carrying many of the wares to be found in the villages. Negotiating is in order, but everything is pretty reasonable, even at the initial asking prices.

The Oaxaca regional museum in the Ex-Convento Santo Domingo gives a thorough insight into the history and customs of the area. And there's a small contemporary-art museum that houses a small, choice permanent collection and occasional fine shows.

There's even a cooking school run by Susana Trilling, a Philadelphia native, who teaches authentic Oaxacan cooking at her charming but remote ranch called "Seasons of My Heart."

Accommodations in the city range from the relatively costly to the modestly priced. There are a number of restaurants that offer vegetarian fare, Oaxacan and Continental cuisine. And then, of course, there are bagels — killer bagels. ■